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ABSTRACT

It is proposed that, whenever feasible, foreign college students be grouped for English-as-a-Second-Language instruction according to their personal oral communication needs and academic objectives rather than mainstreamed into courses with a predominance of native-English-speaking students. These students' needs, it is argued, can be met more effectively in exclusive sections. The primary reason given is that foreign students are reticent about speaking English in front of native speakers, and that this reticence hinders development of English proficiency. Additional reasons include culturally based reluctance to participate openly and documented teacher reluctance to call on non-native-speakers in a mixed group. These factors inhibit the negotiation of meaning and free production. It is also noted that exclusive sections allow for adaptation to more specific student language needs through assignments, classroom instructional focus, guest speakers, specialized teacher training, and instructional materials designed for non-native-speakers. (MSE)

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A CASE FOR EXCLUSIVE SECTIONS OF THE BASIC ORAL COMMUNICATION COURSE: INTERNATIONAL ESL STUDENTS

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The general issue concerning exclusive basic oral communication courses for special groups is not new. Various academic units, whose majors need special professional skills, require their students to take tailor-made service courses such as business and professional communication or speech communication for the classroom teacher. Yet, forthwith is addressed another form or type of issue--it does not involve different courses designed to meet different professional objectives. Instead, it is a question of administrators' assigning separate courses, or at least separate sections of a course, for people who have similar academic objectives as others but relatively unique personal oral communication needs that must be met concomitantly in said course if those similar academic objectives are to be achieved most effectively.

I advance the proposition "Resolved, that special groups should have exclusive sections of the basic oral communication course assigned to them."

Rather than make this a classical proposition of policy, with the practicability aspect being clouded by budgetary and logistic concerns, this will be, as Glen Mills once coined it, a proposition of principle, with the term "should" meaning that it would be desirable at those institutions having the wherewithal to implement it. The justification for any particular group would have to be demonstrated individually. Accordingly, I now set forth the

case for assigning exclusive sections of the basic oral communication course for international students who speak English as their second language.

By exclusive, I mean ESL students would be enrolled only in said sections--unless tested out of them--rather than being "mainstreamed" into ones with predominantly native speakers of English.

By basic course, I mean the large, multiple section course--usually public speaking or fundamentals of speech communication--offered as a service to other academic units. These, or at least the laboratory sections thereof, are often staffed by teaching assistants or associate faculty. Also, they are often the only oral communication requirement of the unit served.

First, some overall information showing the nature and extent of ESL international student enrollments in U.S. colleges and universities. OPEN DOORS 1987-88: REPORT ON INTERNATIONAL EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGE, tells us that in 1987-88 foreign student enrollment in the United States had risen to 356,187, of which nearly 140,000 were undergraduates at four-year institutions, and the vast majority of them were ESL students.[1] This year, 1988-89, at my own campus, Indiana University at Indianapolis, there are 235 international students, and all but twelve are ESL.[2] A statistic which later will be significant to the argument for exclusive sections is that over fifty percent of foreign students attending U.S. institutions are from Asia. The top

five nations placing students here are (1) Taiwan, (2) People's Republic of China, (3) India, (4) Korea, and (5) Malaysia.[3]

Sixty percent of all foreign students are in engineering, science, and business/management related fields; these are fields which usually require our large, basic service courses in oral communication, commonly ones of a performance nature.

Moreover, a majority of these ESL enrollees are sojourner students, whose main objective is to obtain a college education and return to their native countries. We should be hospitable and gracious to them but, most important, we should help them learn to communicate orally early in the their university experience so they can derive maximum benefits from the remainder of their classes here. They need to become as proficient in the language as necessary to maximize their learning. As Young Yun Kim said in her 1988 book, Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation, "for many short-term sojourners . . .contact with the new culture is only peripheral. Reasons for a sojourner in a new culture are often very pragmatic and specific--to pursue a vocation, to obtain a degree. . . . This may require less overall commitment to the host cultural system."[4]

I submit that the oral communication needs of this massive influx of ESL sojourner students can be met more

effectively in exclusive sections than by mainstreaming them into regular sections. Why?

Mainly because of the problem of their noninvolvement, which is exascerbated by their enrollment in regular or mixed-sections. Admittedly, this partially at least is a psychological barrier, but nonetheless a problem which must be addressed. One chief cause for it is pressure from the language barrier in mixed classes. Reticence from whatever basis is a big enough problem even among native speakers of English, but it is compounded geometrically among non-native speakers who perceive themselves as being expected to enter a footrace while they are learning to walk. Yet, if they do not develop a degree of oral communication proficiency early-on, they cannot be beneficiaries of a thorough educational experience in their speech communication courses or any of the many subsequent courses which require interaction or sharing of thoughts between student and professor or among students. Young Yun Kim noted that "excessive conformity pressure in a given environment can be too severe for strangers to manage, intensifying their already acute cross-cultural stress and, thus, impairing their adaptive communicative activities. Such excessive conformity pressure may be felt by exchange students, for instance, who realize that their academic competence is ignored by their fellow classmates due to the language barrier."[5] Upon synthesizing studies on mixed and unmixed ESL classrooms, Craig Chaudron concluded that "there is

clear evidence that in mixed classrooms second language learners risk being less involved in exchanges with the teacher, and possibly less involved in instructionally relevant interactions."[6]

If, because of fear or uncertainty, foreign students withdraw from involvement even in mixed ESL classes, the prospect for reticence from conformity pressure has to be even greater in their minds when placed in mixed speech communication classes where English fluency is presumed among the preponderance of enrollees. During Fall'88 and Spring'89, I circulated a questionnaire among the thirty students in the exclusive section of the basic speech communication course at Indiana University, Indianapolis. Twenty-eight of those students strongly opposed mixed oral communication sections and defended the exclusive ones. Representative of their answers were these:

1. "Because international students need a special system...that they will feel more comfortable. Teacher should be specially trained for this purpose as the one we have right now."

2. "In that way no one stands at an advantage."

3. "Because they [foreign students] have more opportunity to get more. Their comparison with other students is less."

4. "It [mixed class] creates competition and doesn't give foreign students a chance."

5. "Then international student feel left out because there would not anybody who did worst then he is."

6. "Because language problem will let international student felt not comfortable. Probably the instructor will ignore international student."

7. "Because English is my second language, I have a feeling that I cannot be compared with American students."

8. "Because being with native English speakers is very competitive."

9. "Native English speakers are biased. Foreign students would not feel right in this atmosphere."

10. "Because, for example, for me, it is easier to speak in front of international students than in front of people that their native language is English."

11. "We feel more comfortable, our level of knowledge of English is about the same."

While the above quotations have some grammatical and syntactical imperfections, they reflect the convictions of new ESL students seeking U.S. higher education.

The time to counter stress from learning and interacting with a second language, and to prepare for success in a foreign university, is early in the ESL student's academic sojourn. Some who have studied the issue have noted the value of peer groups, such as the exclusive sections proposed here, in reducing pressure. Terrance Albrecht and Mara Adelman tell us that "individuals will be most likely to perceive that those who share a stressful context will be more helpful as sources of support than those who do not share the context, provided that the stressful conditions are seen as reversible to some degree."[7] It later will be seen that nonnative speakers can better help nonnative speakers visualize that reversibility when in exclusive sections.

Fear is not the only reason for the noninvolvement that must be reversed if ESL students are to maximize U.S. education. Some, especially the Asiatics, culturally are unaccustomed to initiating orally in the classroom and therefore will run the risk of not learning to produce contributions in the target language. In 1982, Charlene Sato's study on "Ethnic Styles in the Classroom," concluded that "Asians as a group, although greater in numbers than non-Asians, took significantly fewer self-selected turns than non-Asians (33% vs. 66%, respectively of the total turns) with the Asians adhering more strictly to a pattern of bidding for turns in class . . . instead of just speaking out. Thus, in these classes, Asians' expectations for appropriate turn-taking procedures may be denying them their possibilities for manipulating input."[8] When students withdraw from participation, it is that much more incumbent upon oral communication instructors to develop assignments that promote greater voluntary interaction, and to work with those students in exclusive sections so they might minimize the amount of valuable education which otherwise would be missed by default.

Added to fear and cultural behavior as causes of non-involvement, is the practice of instructors not calling-on second language learners. Whether from not wanting to embarrass ESL students by putting them "on-the-spot" or from thinking ESL's cannot articulate the answers because of the "language barrier," or whatever, instructors tend not to

call-on international students. Thus, unless those students can become voluntarily participative, their noninvolvement will be perpetuated. Again, the Asiatic students suffer more from being ignored than others. Sato's studies have shown that the "significant differences in the teachers' allocation of turns to specific individuals in the groups (40% to Asians, 60% to non-Asians) could in part be explained by the teachers' perception that non-Asians were more ready to participate, and by the similarity between the teachers' expectations and the non-Asians norms of interaction."[9]

However, the U.S. instructors' propensity is not limited to ignoring Asiatics. Craig Chaudron's synthesis of research revealed that instructors are less likely to address all learners, regardless of ethnic background, when they are mixed with native speakers. He emphasized that a "fundamental concern of some language researchers and educators is the apparent disparity in treatment of limited-proficiency students compared with native speakers in mixed classrooms. Much evidence suggests that a mismatch between teachers' and students' cultural norms results in a differential in teacher interactions with students in classrooms."[10]

All these aspects of non-involvement forbode waste and loss in the educational process for ESL students. This problem, inherently associated with mixed classes, at least partially can be alleviated by having ESL's take exclusive

sections of basic oral communication classes early in their undergraduate education. In the appropriate context, especially one which promotes interaction among nonnative speakers, they can become more proficient with the target language, thus enabling them to function more effectively later in their necessarily mixed classes. Gauges of proficiency-development necessarily include negotiation of meaning and productivity of target language phrases. In exclusive classes it has been demonstrated that nonnative speakers do seek meaning more and produce more words and phrases. Veronis and Gass, in their 1985 study of "Nonnative/Nonnative Conversations: A Model for Negotiation of Meaning," showed that NNS-NNS dyadic interactions involved more meaning-negotiating exchanges than NS-NNS interactions. They argued that NNS's "feel more free with one another to indicate noncomprehension and negotiate for meaning."[11]

In the same environment where more meaning is negotiated, i.e. NNS-NNS, more words also are produced. Patricia Porter, in 1986, experimented with dyads and triads of adult intermediate and advanced NNS's and NS's. Learners produced more words with nonnative-speaking peers than with NS's on problem-solving tasks.[12]

Also, Kathy Rulon and Jan McCreary in a study of "Negotiation of Content," affirmed that nonnative speaking peer groups produced significantly more confirmation and clarification checks. They concluded that peer group

discussion may be the best way to promote interaction as a means of attaining TL acquisition."[13]

As ESL's gain proficiency in the target language they better are able to participate in the education process of mixed classes, and not be victims of mixed oral communication sections that only perpetuate the stifling of their involvement.

There are added advantages to exclusive ESL sectioning. Said sections can be adapted more specifically to ESL student needs. For instance, they can feature more interactive assignments which promote more language production along with clarification and confirmation of meaning in the TL. Along with public addresses, there can be more assignments involving interviewing, discussion,and debate. In her 1986 studies on task differentials, Patricia Duff compared a variety of interaction variables in problem-solving discussion and debate tasks and discovered significant advantages to each: the discussions generated such factors as more referential questions and confirmation checks, while debates generated more words per turn and more complex phraseology than the discussions.[14]

In addition to the nature of assignments, the instructor can devote more time to language and delivery concerns that are of general need for NNS's but would be a time drain for NS's if they shared "mainstreamed" sections.

Also, guest speakers and other devices could be included in some of the assignments, so more non-threatening

efforts could be made at clinically perceiving different NS idioms and practices.

Finally, there can be more careful selection and training of instructors for these special sections, training for facilitating ESL student involvement.

The term "exclusive" probably has some rasping connotations for some, but for enhancing the language proficiency and overall educational benefit of ESL students, it is superior to "mainstreaming."

The benefit to ESL students should transcend any academic turf concerns as well. For instance, Patricia Porter et al, of San Francisco State University, wrote a text entitled Communicating Effectively in English: Oral Communication for Non-Native Speakers. It contains many materials similar to those in some of our "hybrid" basic course texts, e.g. interviewing, small-group discussion, informative and persuasive speaking, and debating. Along with this are some specifically adapted language materials and exercises. If handled correctly, either in exclusive sections of our basic oral communication class or in an ESL program, the nonnative speaker could learn the language while obtaining the nucleus of our basic course offerings. Whether taught as an ESL course or as an exclusive section of a course in our discipline, the main consideration is that the ESL student should develop language proficiency along with learning the basics of speech communication. Consequently, the student should be better prepared and more

willing to communicate orally in English in other classes and throughout the academic and social community. The end result should be similar to that expressed by an eighteen year-old Iranian girl in the Spring, 1989, exclusive section of our C110 course. When asked to note what the course was doing or failing to do, she responded: "It makes me feel excited and I want to speak not only in front of class but outside the class." [italics mine]

Exclusive sections can and should have that very effect on ESL international students.

1. Marianthi Zikopoulos (ed) Open Doors: 1987/88. (New York: Institute of International Education, 1987), p. vi.

2. Kenneth A. Rogers, "Foreign Students--1988/89 Annual Enrollent Survey," unpublished document by Indiana University Office of International Services, p. 5.

3. Zikopolous, p. 1

4. Young Yun Kim, Communication and Cultural Adaptation: An Integrative Theory (New York: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 1988) p. 6.

5. Kim, p. 130.

6. Craig Chaudron, Second Language Classrooms: Research on Teaching and Learning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) p. 121.

7. Terrance Albrecht and Mara Adelman, "Social Support and Life Stress: New Directions for Communication Research," in

Kim, p. 20.

8. Charlene Sato, "Ethnic Styles in Classroom Discourse," in Chaudron, p. 105.

9. Ibid., p. 120.

10. Chaudron, pp. 119 and 152.

11. Evangeline Marlos Veronis and Susan Gass, "Nonnative/Nonnative Conversations: A Model for Negotiation of Meaning," Applied Linguistics, Spring 1985, p. 86.

12. Patricia Porter, "How Learners Talk to Each Other: Input and Interaction in Task-Centered Discussions." R.R. Day (ed), Talking to Learn: Conversation in Second Language Acquisition (Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1986), pp. 218-20.

13. Kathy Rulow and Jan McCreary, "Negotiation of Content: Teacher-Fronted and Small Group Interaction," Day (ed.), pp. 189-95.

14. Patricia A. Duff, "Another Look at Interlanguage Talk: Taking Task to Task," Day (ed)., pp. 165-73.